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ABSTRACT

Retrospective assessments by 20 rural administrators who had participated in a five-year Rural Experimental Schools Project (1972-1977) sponsored by the National Institute of Education were investigated to ascertain which factors they felt inhibited or facilitated the process of change in a rural school setting. Information was gathered during a three-day meeting and through a preconference questionniare. Four clusters of factors across time emerged: community, administration, instructional staff, and external forces. Findings were strikingly similar to previous studies about metropolitan areas. Factor clusters closely associated with internal workings of the school were highly consistent; in particular, the role of teachers and administrators in the process of planned educational change was similar. However, in rural areas, external factors were perceived to have had greater disruptive effects, perhaps due to rural schools' more limited internal flexibility, financial and personnel resources, and experience with Federal bureaucracy. Participants also identified shifts in relative importance of factors according to the project's stage of development, whether in planning, implementation, or maintenance. For example, external forces assumed primary importance during planning, while community gained relative importance during maintenance. (RS)

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FACILITATING PLANNED EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN RURAL SCHOOLS: THE ADMINISTRATOR'S PERSPECTIVE*

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*Appreciation is expressed to those rural school administrators who participated in the Rural Education Conference at Winrock Center, Arkansas in July 1977. Their willingness to share openly their successes as well as their failures reflected, in my mind, the true spirit of scientific inquiry. I am equally indebted to the National Institute of Education and the National Rural Center who sponsored the conference which served as the data base for this paper. However, the opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position of either agency, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

ABSTRACT

Facilitating Planned Educational Change in Rural Schools: The Administrator's Perspective

RAYMOND T. COWARD, Purdue University

This study investigated rural administrators' perceptions of factors which facilitated change. The impact of clusters of factors (community, administration, staff and external forces) on developmental stages (planning, implementation and maintenance) was explored. A three-day debriefing conference for rural administrators (n=20) that had participated in a five-year project formed the data base.

In comparison to prior investigations, administrators reported strikingly similar factors in clusters related to administration and staff. However, a greater disruptive effect of those factors outside the school district was reported. The subjects identified shifts in the importance of clusters as a function of the developmental stage of the project.

Introduction

Beginning in 1970 demographers began to track a reversal in the great rural-to-urban population migration pattern that had been common in the decades immediately following World War II (Beale, 1975; Brown, 1977). Between April, 1970 and July, 1974, the nonmetropolitan counties of the United States gained 5.6 percent in population as compared to a 3.4 percent increase for metro areas (Beale, Note 1). Apparently in the eyes of many Americans, the appeal of major urban areas had diminished and the attractiveness of rural and small town communities had increased.

Some of the largest net gains in population for nonmetropolitan communities have been reported in the age categories 5-14 years and 14-19 years (Zuiches & Brown, Note 2).[1] This aspect of the pattern of net gains is particularly striking because it came at a time when many school systems were experiencing declining student enrollment. This increase in school population also coincided with an increasing awareness that most federal educational aid programs had had a distinct "urban" flavor and seldom were oriented at rural schools. During the early 1970's the legislative representatives of rural areas, as well as those with vested interest in small towns, began calling for their "fair share of the federal pie" and, thereafter, agencies (both state and national) began to turn greater attention to the educational process as it functioned in small rural schools.

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[1] Despite the substantial statistically significant shifts in the residence of children in these age ranges towards nonmetropolitan communities, the distribution of school-aged children should be kept in perspective. The majority of children still grow up in urban, metropolitan areas.

The Rural Experimental Schools Program

The Rural Experimental Schools Project of the National Institute of Education (NIE) represented one of the largest attempts to study the process of planned educational change as it occurs in small schools serving rural communities. Begun in 1972 as part of a larger study (see Coward, 1977, for an historical and theoretical perspective on the entire Experimental Schools Program), the project was a five-year, multi-million dollar study involving ten geographically dispersed rural school districts.[2] Concurrently, NIE awarded a contract to Abt Associates, Inc. (Cambridge, Massachusetts) for a comprehensive evaluation of the programs. Since 1972 the staff of Abt Associates have produced and published a series of interim reports related to their activities in this program (Herriott & Rosenblum, 1977).

The conceptual cornerstone of the project was the argument that past efforts at planned educational change had had little effect on the products of schooling because they were limited generally to small segments of the total school program such as curriculum, scheduling or administrative structures. In response to the supposition that such "piecemeal" attempts at change were ineffectual, the Experimental Schools Program (ESP) was created to support a "limited set of large scale experiments of comprehensive design (USOE, 1971)."

The spectrum of individual innovations that were developed as part of the ESP shared little more than their commitment to attacking their problems by

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[2]The communities participating in the study were: (1) Craig, Alaska; (2) Wilcox, Arizona; (3) Howesville, Kentucky; (4) Constantine, Michigan. (5) New Augusta, Mississippi; (6) Groveton, New Hampshire; (7) Myrtle Creek, Oregon; (8) Lead-Deadwood, South Dakota; (9) Quilcene, Washington; and (10) Saratoga, Wyoming.

coordinating "systemic" changes in their operation.[3] The problems that were being attacked and the individual part of the solution that were proposed were each unique to the individual districts. Certainly there were some commonalities, but the ESP was not characterized by one program being implemented in multiple sites--rather by many sites attempting to use the same change strategy.

The Winrock Experience

As this longitudinal study came to a close in July 1977, the National Institute of Education, in cooperation with the National Rural Center (NRC), sponsored a debriefing session at Winrock, Arkansas for those school administrators who had assumed primary responsibility for the projects. Present and past superintendents (n=10) and project directors (n=10) gathered to discuss the commonalities of their experiences and to deliberate on those factors which facilitated or inhibited the process of change in their school district.

Data were collected from administrators using several different methods. Prior to the debriefing, administrators completed a short written questionnaire developed by the staffs of NIE and NRC. During the three day intensive debriefing at Winrock, small and large group discussions were conducted and tape recorded and newsprint was used by discussion facilitators to record group agreements.

An Emerging Framework

As part of the pre-conference written questionnaire, participants were asked which things, people or events had made planned change in their district

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[3] Indeed, even the degree of commitment to this strategy has been challenged by Doyle (1977).

"easier" and which had served as "obstacles." From the responses to these questions a framework emerged which was then used to structure the sessions which followed at the debriefing conference.[4]

The matrix represented four clusters of factors across time. Although not always discussed in these terms, the long list of "facilitators" and "obstacles" which had emerged from the responses of the administrators could be reduced to four primary clusters for organizational efficiency: (1) a community cluster: which incorporated those factors related to the role of the community in the process of change; (2) an administration cluster: which incorporated those factors related to the role of administrators or the importance of certain organizational structures; (3) an instructional staff cluster: which incorporated those factors related to the importance of the instructional staff in bringing about change; and (4) an external forces cluster: which incorporated the importance and influence of outside forces on a district attempting change.

At the same time that the responses of the administrators reflected the above four clusters, the responses also reflected the importance of a time element. That is, the influence of individual factors was in part related to the project's stage of development. Although differing in the number and labeling of the individual stages, taken collectively the responses included a stage related to Planning, where goals were defined and a program plan developed;

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[4]The matrix emerged at a group meeting in which the responses to the pre-conference questionnaire were being analyzed and the conference format and structure being planned. It is impossible to attribute the origin of the matrix to any one individual, rather the framework emerged and was refined by the collective efforts of the group. The group consisted of: David Mack, Russell Mullens and Lynne Fender of the National Institute of Education and consultants Raymond Jongeward (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory), Robert J. Winters (East Lansing Michigan Public Schools) and Raymond T. Coward (Purdue University).

followed by a period of Implementation, where the programs were started and "gotten off the ground"; and concluding with a Maintenance stage, where the primary focus was keeping the innovative programs going or institutionalizing the change.

Figure 1 represents the matrix and the interrelationships of the factor clusters and the time sequence. Although the matrix was grounded in the terms and responses of the administrators, nevertheless, it mirrored the expanding research literature on planned educational change. Indeed, the time dimension has its correlary in those models that have attempted to depict the developmental stages of change (Hage & Aiken, 1970; Herriott & Rosenblum, 1977; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971) and the factor clusters reflect a number of the major inhibiting factors which have emerged from the detailed study of specific innovations (Baldridge & Deal, 1975; Charters & Pellegrin, 1973; Gross, Giaquinta & Bernstein, 1971; Pincus, 1974; Reynolds, 1977; Smith & Keith, 1971).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The matrix served as an organizing structure for the debriefing conference. Sessions at the conference were organized around the time element. As positive and negative factors emerged and were agreed upon, they were then classified by the group into a particular factor cluster (community, administration, staff or external forces). Although never explicitly imposed on the participants, the major task of the debriefing sessions was to "fill-in" the various cells of the matrix.

Results

The large majority of the factors identified as important by the rural school administrators were similar in nature to those which have appeared in earlier studies conducted in metropolitan areas. This overlap was particularly striking in those clusters related to the role of both the administrators and the instructional staff--which when combined accounted for nearly 60% of the total number of factors identified by the administrators. That is, those factor clusters which were most closely associated with the internal workings of the school seemed to be highly consistent across change efforts in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan districts. This suggests that perhaps the role of teachers and administrators in the process of planned educational change is very similar in both large and small districts.

For example, such administrative factors as strong, effective leadership, well-defined roles and expectations for leaders, stability in leadership, and continued administrative commitment have all emerged as important factors in studies of planned educational change in metropolitan school systems. Similarly, such instructional staff issues as sufficient release time for key personnel, staff acceptance and comfortableness with the planned changes and the value of in-service training have been discussed elsewhere as critical factors in facilitating change.

Tables 1 and 2 present those factors which the group of administrators agreed had acted as positive and negative forces in the administration and staff clusters at various stages of the project.

INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

In contrast to previous investigations, however, the experiences of these rural practitioners seemed to reflect a greater disruptive effect of factors outside the school district, i.e., the people of the community and other external forces which impinged on the district. This difference appeared to be less a difference of kind and more a difference of intensity. That is, it was not that the administrators were identifying factors that had not been discussed elsewhere, rather it was that they seemed to be relegating a greater importance to these factors.

The greater relative disruption may in part have been a function of the small school system's inability to cope and manage these external forces and pressures. This seemed particularly apparent with respect to interactions with the federal funding agency. The rural schools' more limited internal flexibility, more limited financial and personnel resources, and more limited experience with the federal bureaucracy, all seemed to constrain their ability to manage external pressures and stress.

Tables 3 and 4 present those factors which the group of administrators agreed acted as positive and negative forces in the community and external forces clusters at various stages of the project.

In addition, the experiences of the administrators reflected a shift in the relative importance of various clusters of factors as a function of the developmental stage of the project. External forces, in particular the funding agency, assumed primary importance during the planning period when districts were trying to narrow the gap between "Washington's" expectations and those of the local staff. But the effect of external forces during this planning stage was not all negative, for the federal dollars also allowed the district time for a planning period; the opportunity to bring outside competencies to the

district and the ability to accelerate changes that were already in progress. In contrast, the relative importance of the community gained during the final stage of maintenance when administrators were trying to institutionalize changes and gain community support to continue changes. The administrators emphasized the importance of instructional staff during the stages of planning and implementation; whereas, the role of administrators seemed consistent across time.[5]

INSERT TABLES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE

Educational Significance

The need for change in today's schools is at least as equally compelling in those districts which serve small towns and rural communities. Indeed, some would argue that it is more compelling in rural schools which traditionally have tended to be less adequately equipped and staffed, more limited in diversity of sources and programs and generally poorer than most metropolitan schools, excluding the inner cities (Burchinal, 1965; Henderson, 1970; Tamblyn, 1971). Yet, despite the recently demonstrated population shift towards nonmetropolitan areas, we know little about the change process as it occurs in rural school districts.

This preliminary investigation, based on the retrospective assessments of rural administrators who had participated in a five-year project of planned educational change, attempted to validate the importance of certain previously

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[5]The latter is perhaps an artifact of the composition of the group--they were all administrators! On the other hand, it may reflect the critical importance of competent, consistent and committed leadership across time.

identified facilitators and inhibitors as they functioned within the nonmetropolitan context. The data indicated a striking consistency with factors which had been identified in previous studies but reflected a potentially greater disruptive effect of external forces. Overall, however, the experiences of these practitioners, because of the substantial similarity, provides increased credibility to the academic interpretations found in the research literature.

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Figure 1: Conceptual Matrix of Factors Facilitating and Inhibiting Planned Educational Change Which Emerged From the Responses of Rural School Administrators to the Pre-Conference Questionnaire

TIME STAGES

FACTOR CLUSTERS	Planning	Implementation	Maintenance
Community			
Administration			
Staff			
External Forces			

Table 1: Positive and Negative Administration Forces Across Time

Time	Positive Forces Facilitating Change	Negative Forces Inhibiting Change
Planning	• Involvement of all administrative personnel who will be affected by the change providing their roles and expectations are well-defined. • Strong leadership and administrative planners with a commitment to change. • Administrative agreement on project goals. • Clearly stated goals and objectives for the planning group.	• Too complex a planning strategy keeps the focus on process rather than content.
Implementation	• Availability of resources - personnel, materials, time, facilities and prepared staff. • A successful planning effort facilitates start up: specifics in the plan, involvement of the same people in start-up and establishment of time lines for realistic implementation. • Effective leadership. • Diagnosis of implementation readiness, and feedback systems to assess level of knowledge about changes. • Level 1 ongoing Program Evaluation.	• Impact of administrative personnel turnover.
Maintenance	• Continued commitment by administrative leadership. • Formative evaluation to assess progress and effectiveness. • Make strategy for maintenance a part of the plan. Behavioral changes and new processes become imbedded in the system and to change back to old ways takes a conscious decision and effort. Fundamental changes, such as curriculum, tend to stay while patch-ons may not. • Personalities made things fail/succeed.	• Personalities made things fail/succeed.

Table 2: Positive and Negative Staff Forces Across Time

Time	Positive Forces Facilitating Change	Negative Forces Inhibiting Change
Planning	• Length of time available for planning. • Payment for planning time. • Well-defined purpose and extent of staff involvement in planning. • Involvement of staff who will be affected by the change providing their roles and expectations are well-defined. • Planning that takes into account staff strengths.	• Too much time between the planning and initial implementation causes loss of momentum. • Payment for planning time.
Implementation	• In-service training • Sufficient release time for key personnel. • Resources availability (time, personnel, facilities, prepared staff and equipment). • Bringing in expertise (special skills) when not locally available. • Staff that is well-informed and know what is expected of them, both individually and collectively. • Successful and specific planning helped implementation.	• Too much release time for key people. • Staff turnover.
Maintanance	• Formative evaluation to assess progress and effectiveness. • Local staff acceptance and comfortableness with the changes. • Make strategy for maintanance a part of the plan. Behavioral changes and new processes become imbedded in the system and to change back to old ways takes a conscious decision and effort. Fundamental changes, such as curriculum, tend to stay while patch-ons may not.	• Local staff turnover.

Table 3: Positive and Negative Community Forces Across Time

Time	Positive Forces Facilitating Change	Negative Forces Inhibiting Change
Planning	• Involvement of community people, with well-defined roles and expectations and in involvement structure that is simple (without layers). • Sensitivity of needs and concerns of the community and its history--not too abrupt a break. • Commitment to change and improvement by community planners.	• Length of time between planning and initial implementation can cause loss of momentum.
Implementation	• Well-informed community, including a process for continually informing them. • Community operating only as an advisory group, not a decision-making body. • Maintenance of the community's commitment to the program.	
Maintenance	• Community evaluation of the project. • Maintain informed community. • School Board turnover.	• School Board turnover.

Table 4: Positive and Negative External Forces Across Time

Time	Positive Forces Facilitating Change	Negative Forces Inhibiting Change
Planning	• The Dollars which allowed for: a. time for a planning period b. bringing outside competencies to the district c. getting changes started because of a new source of funding d. accelerating changes already in progress because of a new source of funding	• A funding agency that did not "have its act together"--that was not specific or consistent about its expectations or intentions (including with respect to the evaluation contractor). • Gap between Washington's and local districts' expectations. • Loss of momentum due to delays in re-negotiation and rewriting of "final" plans. • Feelings of relinquishing local control after accepting the ES money.
Implementation		• External consultants inconsistent. • Lack of direction from funding agency. • Pressures from funding agency.
Maintenance	• Time allowed for institutionalization, by maintaining 5-year commitment. • Events in larger community (over which we had no control) impinged on project. Time changes - from programs dealing with relevance to back to the basics.	• External dollar pullout makes program too costly. You don't maintain it if you can't afford it.